

# *If Beale Street Could Talk*: A film version of the James Baldwin novel

By Joanne Laurier  
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*Written and directed by Barry Jenkins, based on the novel by James Baldwin*

*If Beale Street Could Talk*, directed and written by Barry Jenkins (*Moonlight*), is based on James Baldwin's 1974 novel of the same title. The film centers on the love between two African American youth, one of whom faces a police frame-up, in New York City's Harlem and takes place during the 1970s.

Jenkins' movie is sensitively and thoughtfully done, but almost inevitably reflects some of the problems of the identity politics-obsessed age.

The film opens with a quote from Baldwin: "Every black person born in America was born on Beale Street, born in the black neighborhood of some American city, whether in Jackson, Mississippi, or in Harlem, New York. Beale Street is our legacy." Both the seriousness of the work and its accommodation to racial exclusivity are already indicated.

Nineteen-year-old Tish Rivers (KiKi Layne) narrates much of the film. Her paramour is Fonny Hunt (Stephan James), a 22-year-old budding sculptor whom she has known since childhood. The purity and transcendental quality of their love is in evidence. "It's a miracle to realize that somebody loves you," writes Baldwin in the novel.

At the outset of the non-linear narrative, Tish is pregnant and Fonny incarcerated, awaiting trial for a rape he did not commit. "I hope that nobody has ever had to look at anybody they love through glass," laments Tish. With every prison visit, Tish sees Fonny grow thinner and his face marred further by cuts and bruises.

Speaking of the general condition of the black poor and repeating Baldwin's words, Tish asserts: "Though the death took many forms, though people died early in many different ways, the death itself was very simple and the cause was simple, too: as simple as a plague: the kids had been told that they weren't worth shit and everything they saw around them proved it. They struggled, they struggled, but they fell, like flies, and they congregated on the garbage heaps of their lives, like flies."

After Tish tells Fonny he is going to be a father, she then conveys this information to her family, which includes her mother Sharon (the remarkable Regina King), father Joseph (Colman Domingo), a longshoreman, and older sister Ernestine (Teyonah Parris). Joseph is charged with informing Fonny's family, the Hunts, who, with the exception of the patriarch Frank (Michael Beach), a garment worker, are hostile towards Tish, whom they

consider Fonny's inferior. An unpleasant meeting between the families leads to a melt-down and a nasty tirade from the "sanctified" Mrs. Hunt (Aunjanue Ellis).

The two fathers, however, work together to raise money for Fonny's bail, going so far as to steal from their respective employers. Meanwhile, Ernestine has engaged an idealistic young white lawyer, Hayward (Finn Wittrock), to defend Fonny. (Baldwin: "But the calendars were full—it would take about a thousand years to try all the people in American prisons, but the Americans are optimistic and still hope for time—and sympathetic or merely intelligent judges are as rare as snowstorms in the tropics. There was the obscene power and the ferocious enmity of the D.A.'s office.")

Flashbacks include a get-together between the lovers and a kindly, Jewish landlord (Dave Franco) to secure a loft in lower Manhattan, as well as a confrontation between Fonny and a racist white cop Bell (Ed Skrein), who is instrumental in framing up the young man.

(In the novel, Tish says about Bell: "If you look steadily into that unblinking blue, into the pinpoint at the center of the eye, you discover a bottomless cruelty, a viciousness cold and icy. In that eye, you do not exist: if you are lucky. If the eye, from its height, has been forced to notice you, if you do exist in the unbelievably frozen winter which lives behind that eye, you are marked, marked, marked, like a man in a black overcoat, crawling, fleeing across the snow. The eye resents your presence in the landscape, cluttering up the view.")

There is a wrenching scene in which Fonny's old friend Daniel (Brian Tyree Henry) recounts the abuses he suffered at the hands of the police who framed him for car theft and then in prison ("The white man's *got* to be the devil. He sure ain't a man. Some of the things I saw, baby, I'll be dreaming about until the day I die.").

In a desperate—and futile—effort to save Fonny, Tish's mother Sharon embarks on a trip to Puerto Rico, where Fonny's accuser has fled, to plead for the innocent man. Baldwin gives these words to Sharon: "I don't speak Spanish and they don't speak no English. But we on the same garbage dump. For the same reason...Whoever discovered America deserved to be dragged home, in chains, to die."

(In the novel's closing passage, Tish and Fonny's child first encounters the world: "The baby cries and cries, cries like it means to wake

the dead.”)

*If Beale Street Could Talk* is a lyrical, disturbing work with tightly orchestrated and careful performances, cinematography and score. The acting is fine, and James Laxton’s earth-toned cinematography captures Baldwin’s view that “New York must be the ugliest and the dirtiest city in the world. If any place is worse, it’s got to be so close to hell that you can smell the people frying.” Nicholas Britell’s score is an elegant, seamless combination of jazz, blues and classical music.

Furthermore, Jenkins’ movie stands out in an industry dominated at present, as we have noted on more than one occasion, by vacuous super-hero franchises. The storyline involving police violence and racism speaks truthfully to a cruel social reality, at a time in which police killings constitute a burning issue.

But while *If Beale Street Could Talk* undoubtedly rises above the vast majority of the current film fare, what it doesn’t say as much as what it does leaves the door open to genuinely harmful conceptions.

A passivity and a pessimism, first of all, in regard to the possibility of *changing* concrete social reality, divert the filmmakers—and diverted Baldwin in his novel, to a certain extent—into elevating “pure love” as a timeless phenomenon that apparently cannot be contaminated by the senseless, savage vagaries of existence. The message, to put it crudely: the world is dreadful, but there is love.

In an interview, director Jenkins says that “what moved me about the novel was that anger never completely consumed or overwhelmed the love, the community, the family. For me to have made it from a point of *Fuck this, fuck everything*, that would have almost—*tainted* is the wrong word, but it would have affected the depictions of their love.” Elsewhere, the filmmaker told the media that the answer to “racism and prejudice” was “sitting together, in a room like this, and talk[ing] about everything. What we have in common is that we all came from a woman. It’s about being nurtured with love.”

This is very weak, and not at all helpful.

Associated with this worship of the accomplished social and economic fact is an implied racial exclusivism that teeters on the brink of self-pity. Central to this is the false notion that there is some uniquely “African American” experience and response to the world.

Baldwin only sparingly touches on class issues in the novel: “The poor are always crossing the Sahara. And the lawyers and bondsmen and all that crowd circle around the poor, exactly like vultures. Of course, they’re not any richer than the poor, really, that’s why they’ve turned into vultures, scavengers, indecent garbage men, and I’m talking about the black cats, too, who, in so many ways, are worse.”

In the movie’s New York City, the non-black characters can be counted on one hand: the vile white cop, and a miniscule assortment of other minorities. Even though the novel was written between 1968 and 1973 and published in 1974, during a wave of global upheavals, including the uprisings in the inner cities in the US, there is no hint of any of this in either the book or the movie.

Baldwin was attracted to socialism and revolution as a youth,

once describing himself as “a convinced fellow-traveler” of the Communist Party as a teenager and later as a “Trotskyite,” although it is not entirely clear what his “Trotskyism” consisted of. During the Cold War period he drifted generally to the right. By 1956, in the *Nation*, he was denouncing as “doctrinaire” and “elementary” those who approached the race question in America from a class-conscious standpoint and heaping scorn on the notion of “black-white solidarity.”

Racism and racist police are appalling social realities that need to be fought tooth and nail, but they are an expression of the harsh character of social relations in capitalist America, not the inevitable emanation of the “white race.”

Only last week, we reviewed *The Innocent Man*, which documents the frame-up and railroading to decades in prison of four entirely innocent white men for murders committed in the 1980s. And it didn’t take Jenkins to discover police frame-ups or lovers at the mercy of a cruel, uncaring world. In its better days, Hollywood produced *Fury*, *You Only Live Once*, *They Live By Night*, *Railroaded!*, *Desperate* and many others.

Identity politics continues to have a terrible impact on art and cultural life.

Jenkins is an interesting artist, with aesthetically valuable instincts, who has come of age in a debased climate where the political presence and dynamism of the working class has been suppressed. One feels the consequences.

The *New York Times* and its critics are another story. In her deplorable review of *If Beale Street Could Talk* (“Trusting Love in a World Ruled by Hate”), Manohla Dargis, for example, writes that “In most white screen romances, the love between a man and a woman (and its tests) tends to be framed in personal terms, as a matter of individual will, of good or foolish choices of the heart and head. ... Here, the world—white, pitiless, punishing—comes down like a hammer on Fonny and Tish. Because no matter the purity and grace of their love when they wander the Village, or eat in a friendly Spanish restaurant that was a Baldwin favorite, they are never simply two people in love but also an affront to the power of the white world...” Those who use such phrases are professional racialists and reactionaries.

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